

## MARBLEHEAD REPORTER

# Sustainable Marblehead: Head outside for a new challenge

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Published 10:01 a.m. ET Mar. 11, 2021

1984. No, not the novel. The actual, physical year. Summer in elementary school with my best friend, Emily. We spent hours climbing the huge pine tree in Emily's yard — each with our own branch to call “home,” 15 feet up, legs dangling, huge smiles. Running around the neighborhood by ourselves with our notebooks and pencils, pretending to be Harriet, of “Harriet the Spy.” Making notations about anything going on — which, in all honesty, was not much — but exciting nonetheless. Walking to the community pool, swimming all day and eating french fries on the grass. This is the stuff of days gone by.

Flash forward to 2021. What will this summer hold for today's children? Chances are, like most average kids, they will likely spend much more time inside than their parents did at their age, including about 50 hours per week with digital entertainment, according to Linda Akesson McGurk, author of “There's No Such Thing as Bad Weather.”

McGurk explains that fears of things like traffic, injury and strangers, coupled with frenzied extracurricular activities, are keeping kids inside, where they are becoming more enthralled with screens for entertainment.

Experts warn this trend is not good for our kids. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, excessive screen time may lead to sleep problems, lower grades, less reading, as well as problems with weight and mood.

Author Amy Williams in “Life as a Human,” elaborates that technology can even alter brain development due to the fast-paced stimuli on devices.

Despite these discouraging facts, all is not lost. We can give our kids a taste of the summers of our youth, and begin to counteract the negative effects of too much time online.

We can start by rising to the challenge from Sustainable Marblehead. This March through May, they are encouraging families to spend 60 hours per month in nature in their Outdoor Challenge.

“As a parent of three kids, ages 19, 16 and 12, and an educator, I see all too well how easy it is to slip into the lost hours of screen time,” says Jean Skaane, leader of the Education Working Group of Sustainable Marblehead. “Yet we are blessed to live in a beautiful part of the world surrounded by water, beaches, parks, trails, sports fields, clean air, and safe neighborhoods. We have no reason for our children not to be outside!

“The Outdoor Challenge is a fun opportunity for all of us — adults and youth — to notice how we spend our time, and possibly make a shift that in the end feels great!”

A Harvard Medical School article points out that it's not just children; adults are spending less time outdoors as well. That's why the Outdoor Challenge is not solely aimed at children, but at entire families, explained Skaane.

Challenge participant Lisa Ceplikas says, “I saw the flyer for the outdoor challenge and thought it was a creative way to encourage and pay attention to how much my two kids are getting outside. I like the simplicity of the challenge and the emphasis on the goal of putting electronics away and going outside.”

There are six crucial ways that playing outside helps children, according to author Claire McCarthy, and many of these benefits also pertain to adults. From obtaining vitamin D to support our immune systems from the sunshine, to exercising

for better heart health, to taking risks and building confidence, time spent outdoors is time well spent.

More good news: Devoting time to nature is not only good for adults and children, but also for the Earth. Children and Nature Network Research Digest reports that promoting “nature connectedness” during childhood is a predictor of enduring positive attitudes toward the environment and good stewardship of the earth.

Sustainable Marblehead’s Outdoor Challenge boasts a community-building public Facebook group, an Instagram account with inspiration and news on events, and information on their web page. To participate, each family member simply prints a beach or flower tracking sheet, designed by Marblehead student Sadie Clark, and for each hour outside, they color a space on the page. Individuals who meet the monthly challenge and email photos of their tracking sheets to Sustainable Marblehead will be awarded small prizes. Details can be found at <http://sustainablemarblehead.org>.

My wonderful summer of 1984 has come and long gone, and that’s OK, because the summer of 2021 is just around the corner, begging for new memories to be made. Starting with the Outdoor Challenge, I plan to reacquaint myself with the girl of old, swimming, climbing (very small, very low) trees with my kids, and walking around my neighborhood — minus “Harriet the Spy” gear, I promise, neighbors. Get ready, 2021, because we are so ready to head back outside.

*For information on Sustainable Marblehead, visit <https://sustainablemarblehead.org>.*